

BAM blog

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Hope, Unwavering



Brooklyn Interdenominational Choir, 2016. Photo: Elena Olivo

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In Context: Silent Voices

Silent Voices—Composers' Notes

By David Hsieh

There are years of triumphs and years of setbacks. There are years of prosperity and years of reckoning. There are years when the country is at war. There are years when the country seems lost.

But throughout the years, people have come to BAM to pay respect to a person who embodied integrity, perseverance, and an unwavering moral compass. They come to give thanks to a person who symbolized the stigmata they have borne and the spirit to rise above the worst human impulse. They come because they all share this man's dream that freedom will one day ring in all the land. They come to [pay tribute to Martin Luther King, Jr.](#)

They come with their multigenerational families, with their friends, with their colleagues, with people they met here in previous years.

Brooklyn Borough Hall held its first Martin Luther King, Jr. Day Tribute in 1987, the year after it became a Federal holiday. But it quickly became clear that it needed a larger venue to accommodate all the people who wanted to attend, so it moved to BAM in 1990 and has been held here ever since; Medgar Evers College joined as co-presenter in 2001. As one of the biggest auditoriums in Brooklyn, BAM had a long tradition of holding civic gatherings. In the pre-television era, many presidential candidates spoke at BAM. So a community gathering to pay tribute to a great leader of the Civil Rights Movement was a natural fit.

The format of the tribute has been consistent: remarks by public figures, uplifting entertainment, and a keynote speaker who was either at the front line of the Civil Rights Movement or is now carrying the torch. And over the years, many great figures have been invited to speak on the theme of equality and freedom.

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The audience in 2016. Photo: Elena Olivo

Robert F. Kennedy Jr. spoke in 1991. Paul Robeson Jr. came in 1994. A congressman and the only living "Big Six" of the Civil Rights Movements, John Lewis, was here in 1999; Angela Davis, who was prosecuted and acquitted for her political activity came in 2014. Then First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton was a special guest in 2000. Wynton Marsalis put everyone in swinging mood in 2004. Mavis Staples shook the rafters with her soaring gospel songs in 2008. Kofi Annan advocated for creating a better world through international cooperation in 1998.

And in some years there were fiery words, like when Harry Belafonte excoriated former President George W. Bush of leading the country into a "moral abyss" in 2013, or when Cornel West chastised the "new Jim Crow in prisons all over the country" in 2015. Some years there were tears of joy and pride, like in 2012 when President Obama's inauguration was broadcast live at BAM on the big screen. But there were also lighter moments, such as when Al Roker brought his infectious laugh and good cheer in 1992.

And on January 16, 2017, as in the past 30 years, **the tribute will again take place in the Howard**

In Context: The Beauty Queen of Leenane

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[Gilman Opera House](#). Brooklyn will unite again at a time when tension is high, the future uncertain. But as Dr. King said in his last speech in Memphis, "The world is all messed up. The nation is sick. Trouble is in the land; confusion all around... But I know, somehow, that only when it is dark enough can you see the stars."

And so people will come. They will hear Opal Tometi, one of founders of Black Lives Matter, speak on the continuous fight for all people to "not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character." They will be uplifted by the performances of the Campbell Brothers and the Institutional Radio Choir. They will as a community come together to share one ideal, one belief, one commitment, one pledge, as written in the scriptures: "Let us not grow weary of doing good, for in due season we shall reap if we do not give up."

David Hsieh is a publicity manager at BAM.

Posted by Susan at 1:04 PM

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